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JOHN SPENCER AND THE ROOTS OF IDOLATRY

Comparative religion is usually perceived to have emerged, like other comparative sciences, in the second half of the nineteenth century, under the influence of biology, in particular Cuvier's comparative anatomy and Darwin's evolutionary theory. Such a perception must be strongly qualified. The real breakthrough in comparing cultures and religions, rather, should be seen as stemming from the seventeenth-century transformation of discourse on religion.[1] A few scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, then learned to recognize, although in different ways and from different perspectives, the multiplicity of observable religions, past

For a recent study of the discipline of the modern study of religion and its development in the late nineteenth century, see H. G. Kippenberg, *Die Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte: Religionswissenschaft und Moderne* (Munich, 1997). A version of this text was read at the University of Chicago on May 8, 2000. I am greatly indebted to Bruce Lincoln for his invitation and for his hospitality. I have profited much from my talks with him, and from questions of the audience. An earlier version had been read as my second Boutwood lecture at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, on February 17, 1998. I wish to thank Sir Tony Wrigley, Master of Corpus Christi, kindest of hosts, and to express my gratitude to Professor William Horbury, for his unfailing generosity, in a variety of ways.

[1] R. Popkin speaks of the "budding development of comparative religion" in the second half of the seventeenth century. See J. E. Force and R. H. Popkin, eds., *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology,* Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Idées, 129 (Boston and London: Kluwer, 1990), p. 9. While it is true that the latter part of the seventeenth century would see a plethora of works of "comparative religion," it seems to me that the real watershed separating the Renaissance from the modern world happened rather in the early part of that century.

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and present. Eventually, comparison would be no longer mainly perceived as a polemical tool but, rather, would be used to recognize the irreducibility of differences, as well as the similarities between cults and beliefs, near and afar, past and present.

The application of philological methods to the biblical texts, together with the combination of ethnological observation and philology, led to a major breakthrough. It permitted the historicization of religious truth and a strong rejection of the symbolic thought which had been so much in fashion during the Renaissance. Instead of a *prisca theologia* or a *philosophia perennis* expressing itself under different garbs in the various religions and philosophies, truth had become univalent. Rather than different levels of truth, one now identified its multiple origins. Even the Scriptures had to be understood as documents of past civilizations.[2] Comparison, then, was to be added to the chronological study of religious ideas and customs. In this new world of knowledge, where all forms of religious practice came to be recognized and studied, various forms of "paganism," that is, of religious error, were prominent, from Greece to China, and from the American Indians to the ancient Egyptians. If I were to single out one keyword for the period under discussion, I would choose "idolatry."[3] The recognition of the multifaceted presence of idolatry and the study of its origins was a major concern for all students of religion in early modern Europe.[4] The centrality of idolatry in early modern scholarship on ancient religions and cultures, which is almost ubiquitous,[5] would be particularly clearly expressed, for instance, by Etienne Fourmont (1683–1745), a versatile scholar who was

[2] See G. G. Stroumsa, "*Homeros hebraios:* Homère et la Bible aux origines de la culture européenne, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles," in *L'Orient dans l'histoire religieuse de l'Europe,* ed. M. A. Amir Moezzi and John Scheid, Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses (Louvain: Peters, 2000), pp. 89–107; and "Richard Simon: From Philology to Comparatism," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 3 (2001), in press. Arnaldo Momigliano, better than anyone else, perceived the broader intellectual context of early biblical criticism a long time ago. See, e.g., his "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 3 (1950): 285–315, reprinted in his *Contributo all storia degli studi classici* (Roma, 1955), pp. 67–106.

[3] Some sophisticated discussions of the concept of idolatry, including attempts at new definitions, occur already among sixteenth-century missionaries to the Americas, such as Bartolomé de Las Casas and José de Acosta. See S. MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 265–66.

[4] Oddly enough, "idolatry" does not appear in the index of the excellent anthology of B. Feldman and R. D. Richardson, Jr., *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680–1860* (1972; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). The suggestive work of my colleagues M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), does not deal with this issue.

[5] See, e.g., Thomas Tenison, *On Idolatry: A Discourse* (London, 1678). Tenison, like John Spencer, was a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

professor of Arabic at the Collège de France.[6] A central problem for any new cognitive structure lies in the need to legitimize its epistemological foundation. As I hope to show here, the search for the roots and nature of idolatry seems to have provided this legitimation for the nascent science of religion. In order to do so, I shall focus upon the Cambridge scholar John Spencer, whose work has been claimed by William Robertson Smith to stand at the very origin of the modern comparative study of religion.[7]

"Idolatry" was a heavily loaded term, constantly used in the Catholic Protestant polemics. The slogan "idolatry" had been a rallying cry for the Dutch Calvinists in their war against Spain and the Catholics.[8] The Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617–88), popularized the term "polytheism" (although he did not invent it).[9] This term was less loaded than "idolatry," and it put the comparison of religious worldviews on a new footing. Throughout the following century, from Bayle through Hume to d'Holbach and Voltaire, the term "polytheism" was preferred to idolatry and was felt to convey a sense of a religious tolerance usually foreign to monotheistic systems.

Different models of comparison were used in our period. The new could be explained by the old: for instance, the Indians of India or of America, or even the Chinese, could be compared to the Jews, or the Phoenicians, or the Iranians. Reciprocally, the old could be explained by the new: thus biblical idolatry was better understood when compared to idolatrous religious practices observed among the Indians, and Egyptian idolatry was better understood when compared to that of India or China, for instance. Following the same method, one could also compare two ancient religions, such as those of Phoenicia and Greece (the former being the source of the latter), or two religions of the present (such as those of India and China, for instance).

One should first insist on the international and interreligious character of the *république des lettres.* Ideas traveled fast and often crossed the

[6] On Fourmont, see, e.g., Feldman and Richardson, pp. 83–85. On the notion of idolatry in seventeenth-century scholarship, see, e.g., H. Pinard de la Boullaye, *L'étude comparéedes religions* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1929), 1:168–75. On "idolatry," more specifically, in the English context, see P. Harrison, *"Religion" and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 45–58.

[7] W. Robertson Smith, preface, *Religion of the Semites* (1894), p. vi, quoted in *Dictionary of National Biography,* 18:767, s.v. "Spencer." For Professor Fausto Parente, Robertson Smith's statement has little historical validity, as one cannot speak of a comparative approach to the history of religions before the discovery of the relationship between Greek and Sanskrit (private communication, May 29, 2000).

[8] A. Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis: Seventeenth-Century Apologetics and the Study of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 24.

[9] The term (in Greek) appears in John Selden, *De Diis Syris* (London, 1617).

Channel back and forth. Between the Netherlands, England, and France intellectual communication functioned quite well (perhaps better than today). To be sure, there remained some significant differences between Catholic and Protestant milieus, some of which will be noted further on. For a variety of reasons, however, Germany, Spain, and Italy remained rather different cases.[10]

Intellectual contacts between France and England were multiform. To be sure, a Richard Simon was less free to express his views under the totalitarian Catholic regime in which Bossuet held a powerful censorship than a Vossius or a Pockoke in Oxford. Yet we must not forget that it is during his years of voluntary exile in France that Locke wrote his *Treatise on Human Understanding*—although he had to leave France upon hearing of the unhappiness his views caused the Catholic hierarchy. It is in Paris, where he served as ambassador, that Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648) published his *De veritate,* a landmark in the discourse on religion (in 1625). Incidentally, the book was translated into French, but never into English. Many of Richard Simon's ideas on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were first developed in his *Additions* to the French translation of Edward Brerewood's *Enquiries touching the diversity of languages and religions through the chief parts of the world* (1614; French translation 1640). Simon himself was involved in a polemics against the Anglican Isaac Vossius.

The Oratorian Richard Simon (1638–1712), the father of biblical criticism, translated into French a remarkable work by Leone Modena, a Venetian Rabbi. *I riti degli Ebrei,* composed in the second decade of the century (but first published in 1637), is the first ethnological description of Jewish life written by a (nonconverted) Jew for a Gentile readership. To the second edition (1681) Simon appended an important text of his own, a comparative study (both synchronic and diachronic) of Judaism and Christianity, under the title *Comparaison des cérémonies des juifs et des sacrements de l'Eglise.*[11] Both Simon's and Modena's works were to achieve lasting fame in England, as elsewhere, thanks to the English translation of a major work of vulgarization, *Ceremonies and Customes of the several Nations of the Known World,* with magnificent engravings by Bernard Picart, a multivolume encyclopedia of religion that appeared in London between 1723 and 1743. The French original, which had appeared the same year in Amsterdam, was republished at least eleven

[10] See F. E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 9.

[11] A new annotated edition of the two texts was published by J. Le Brun and G. G. Stroumsa, *Les juifs présentés aux chrétiens* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1998).

times in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[12] Picart himself was an engraver, born in France as a Catholic, who emigrated to Hague in 1710, after his conversion to Protestantism. Like many other Huguenots in the Refuge, he underwent a series of religious transformations and eventually came to be, in London, among the founders of the pre-Masonic order of the Knights of Jubilation. Picart argued for the rejection of old religious customs. At the same time, he produced his encyclopedia, which did much to present accurate ethnological knowledge on the various religions to a large public. The general preface of *Cérémonies et coutumes* speaks (already) of the *Etre Suprême* in whom all peoples, including the most savage ones, believe, although usually under different names (Dieux, Démons, Génies, etc.). This similarity between all religions is often hidden by the great cultic differences. Thus, the need for a preliminary dissertation on religious cult. The study of the *étrange bizarrerie* found in cultic practices is meant to underline the common theism of mankind, which crosses religious boundaries, and to insist upon the relativity of religions. In the eighteenth century, indeed, the religious unity of mankind is used by the Deists as an argument against the established churches.

Before we turn to Spencer, let us briefly review some landmarks of the relevant English scholarly production throughout the seventeenth century. One of the earliest and most influential comparative studies of religion in that century was perhaps the huge work of the English clergyman Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the religions observed in all ages and places discovered, from the creation unto the present.* The first part of the book offers a "theological and geographical" study ("histoire") of Asia, Africa, and America and propounds a chronological taxonomy of non-Christian religions; "Heathenish, Jewish and Saracenicall." In each category, the author offers to analyze, as he explains on the title page, the various "opinions, idols, oracles, temples, priests, fasts, feasts, sacrifices, and rites religious; their beginnings, proceedings, alterations, sects, orders and successions." From this ambitious and all-encompassing list emerges Purchas's clear intention to study in all their aspects, mainly cultic, the various religious phenomena of mankind throughout the ages. *Purchas his Pilgrimage* also underlines the obvious links between the early stages of comparative religion and travel literature. In the subtitle, again, Purchas offers to lard his book "with brief descriptions of the countries, nations, states, discoveries, private and publicke customes, and the most remarkable

[12] For the various translations of Modena's book, see the introduction in ibid. A monographic study of *Cérémonies et coutumes* is a desideratum; I intend to deal with it in a forthcoming study on the birth of comparative religion.

rarities of nature, of humane industrie." He is quite conscious of the novelty of his enterprise, when he writes that "the newnesse also makes it more difficult, being an enterprise never yet (to my knowledge) by any, in any language, attempted." Let us not be mistaken, however, in imagining that such an open mind would be quite free from prejudice or from any vested interest beyond scientific curiosity. One of the avowed goals of the book, indeed, is to demonstrate the pagan origins of "Popish rites."[13] Like the other human sciences, comparative religion remains a product of its age.

In 1614, a year after the publication of Purchas's *Pilgrimage,* Edward Brerewood published his *Enquiries touching the diversity of languages and religions through the chief parts of the world.*[14] Here too, one can notice the deep influence of travel reports, to which Brerewood often refers. One of the most remarkable characters of the work is Brerewood's insistence on the close links between language and religion, and the importance of oriental languages and philology for the study of religions. Like Purchas, Brerewood divides the religions of the world into four categories: "idolatrie, Mahumetanisme, Judaisme and Christianity."[15] Here too, one should call attention to the special place and importance given to Judaism, side by side with Islam and Christianity. Both Purchas and Brerewood are perfectly aware of the present dispersion, lowly status, and social insignificance of the Jews. Both their taxonomies, however, reflect the traditional place of Judaism in Christian consciousness: the religion of Israel is granted a special place, side by side with its daughter, the religion of Christ, and in clear contradistinction to other religions, Islam included. Israelite religion, however, has now been transformed into Judaism, which includes also the religious practices of contemporaneous Jews (let us remember that before Cromwell let them return to England, the Jews remained rather mysterious and abstract for English intellectuals). Another phenomenon noticed by Brerewood is the existence of diverse forms of Christianity—what he calls its different sects. Greeks, first of all, but also Syrians, Melkites, Georgians, Moskovites and Russians, Nestorians, Indians, Copts, Maronites, etc., Oriental Christians appear in their diversity as so many cults, which should first of all be described as

[13] Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the religions observed in all ages and places discovered, from the creation unto the present* (London, 1613).

[14] Edward Brerewood, *Enquiries touching the diversity of languages and religions through the chief parts of the world* (London, 1614). Brerewood's book appeared in French translation in 1640. An "ecumenical" plan to republish it in Geneva, together with additions by the Catholic Richard Simon, never materialized. Simon's text was discovered and published only recently; see *Additions aux recherches curieuses d'E. Brerewood sur la diversité des langues et religions,* ed. J. Le Brun and D. Woodbridge (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983).

[15] Brerewood, p. 79.

truthfully as possible. These various "sects" are also called "religions." Indeed, in this period scholars often approach religion as an ensemble of rituals, practices, and customs rather than as a system of beliefs. The interest which Eastern Christians present is obvious: both Catholics and Protestants seek to draw them to their camp. Hence, their liturgies are analyzed, and note is made of similarities to synagogal cult. Ethnological curiosity, mission, ecumenism, and philology: all these various elements will play a role in the new organization of knowledge.

Another landmark in the discovery of the plurality of religious traditions is *Pansebeia, or a view of all religions in the world,* by the English polymath Alexander Ross.[16] The book, in the form of questions and answers, proposes to recognize religion, that is, rituals and collective actions, as the cement of any society. Establishing himself mainly on biblical religious history, Ross thus seeks to identify what one may call, in Durkheimian fashion, the elementary forms of religious life. In particular, he is fascinated by antediluvian history: the sacrifices of Cain and Abel, the tower of Babel, and so on. Using the various testimonies at his disposal, Ross analyzes the religions of the different continents. He discusses the religions of Guinea, Virginia, Florida, New Spain, Mexico, Yucatan, Brazil, Peru, and Hispagnola. He also analyzes the ancient religions of Europe, those of the Greeks and Romans, as well as those of the early Germans, Gauls, Brittons, Saxons, Danes, Swedes, Moscovites, and Lithuanians. He describes their pantheons, priests, sacrifices and matrimonial and funerary ceremonies. As for contemporaneous religions in Europe, he considers them to be Christianity and Islam. To be sure, the confrontation between Christianity and Islam does not take place only in Europe: the decline of Christianity in the Levant is due to the victory of "Mohametanism." But from a sociological point of view, Islam was in Ross's days, as it is now, a European religion. It is worth noting that a few years before the permission granted by Cromwell to the Jews to come back to England, Ross raises the question of religious freedom for them and supports it, adding that a tolerant attitude is more likely to encourage them to convert than persecution.

These three examples, Purchas, Brerewood, and Ross, demonstrate a growing acknowledgement in seventeenth-century England of the importance of practices, side by side with belief systems, for the understanding of religion. From Modena's *Riti degli Ebrei* (written around 1613) to Spencer's *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus* (fully published in 1685) the century saw a growing interest in rituals, culminating with the heated intra-Catholic argument (in particular between the Jesuits and the

[16] Alexander Ross, *Pansebeia, or a view of all religions in the world,* 2d ed. (London, 1653).

Friars), the famous "querelle des rites," about the nature of Confucian rituals and the legitimacy of sinophilia and Chinese acculturation among the missionaries.[17]

Attempts to legitimize the newly discovered cults had not begun, of course, with the Confucian rites. Much earlier, the works of the Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566) and, somewhat later, of the Jesuit José de Acosta (1540–1600), had already opened the way to Vossius's and Herbert of Cherbury's studies of pagan idolatry.[18] Comparisons between paganism in Greece and Rome and that of America usually turned to the disadvantage of ancient paganism.

Ex oriente religio and *ex oriente idololatria* are major methodological presuppositions of the times. Thanks in particular to the development of a comparative chronology of the ancient nations, especially by John Marsham, the Orient was now recognized as much older than Greek antiquity.[19] By the peoples and religions of the ancient Near East, one referred in particular to those of Syria and of Egypt, while Babylonia remained terra incognita: *Babel und Bibel* would become a major theme of Orientalism only in the late nineteenth century.[20]

In a series of brilliant though diffused and often far-fetched comparisons and parallels, the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher had presented during the first half of the seventeenth century a series of hypotheses and suggestions on the possible contacts between early languages, civilizations, and religions.[21] Few of his intuitions, however, would survive: he had too little method, and his universal ambitions remind one more of the Renaissance than of the seventeenth century. But this should not diminish our appreciation for his most important intuition: the various cultures of the ancient world were to be studied together. Following Joseph Scaliger, John Marsham had established the basis for historical, that is, first of all, chronological comparisons between religious ideas and cults.

[17] See esp. D. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Stuttgart, 1983).

[18] Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Brevissima relacion de la destruccion de las Indias* was published in 1552, while José de Acosta's *De procuranda Indorum salute* appeared in 1596. See in particular L. Hanke, *All Mankind Is One: A Study of the Disputation between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indians* (De Kalb, Ill., 1974); A. Pagden, *Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge, 1981); C. Bernand and S. Gruzinski, *De l'idolâtrie: Une archéologie des sciences religieuses* (Paris, 1988).

[19] On comparative chronology, see A. Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 104–44.

[20] See M. T. Larsen, "The 'Babel/Bible' Controversy and Its Aftermath," in *The Civilizations of the Ancient Near East,* ed. J. M. Sasson (New York: Scribner, 1995), 1:95–106.

[21] On Kircher, see, e.g., J. Fletcher, ed., *Athanasius Kircher und seine Beziehungen zum Gelehrten Europas seiner Zeit,* Wolfenbüttler Arbeiten zum Barockforschung, 17 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988).

Throughout the seventeenth century, writers hesitate between two main theories of idolatry. The one sees it as a degeneration of the original monotheism, while the other prefers to insist upon progress in religious history. These two theories of idolatry are reflected in the two main perceptions of biblical history, both present since patristic literature: the plagiarism theory, according to which Satan seeks to imitate God in history and to corrupt the original true religion, and the theory of condescendence (*sunkatabasis*), according to which God reluctantly agrees to sanction pagan practices—such as sacrifices—since this is the only way in which ancient peoples in general, and the Israelites in particular, knew how to respect God.

Much of the intellectual production of the seventeenth century, moreover, would reflect a progressive disentanglement from two traditional ideas. The first was the Renaissance *philosophia perennis* approach: a general identification of the various gods of past civilizations. The second had its intellectual roots in patristic apologetics of the first centuries: I refer to the so-called theft theory: whatever is interesting or respectable in pagan religion or philosophy reflects a Mosaic origin. Clement of Alexandria, in particular, had developed this theory, especially in regard to Platonism. One could tone the argument down, by speaking of borrowing rather than theft, but the idea remained basically the same: similarities between the various ancient cultures and cults testify to contacts.

A major trend throughout the seventeenth century represents a reworking of this approach. This trend seeks to interpret idolatry as a misunderstanding and an alteration of primitive monotheism, as an intellectual error and moral degeneration. For such an approach, the origins of mankind were ideal, paradisiac times. It also implies a conception of universally valid statements about religion. In a sense, this approach was the natural one for Deists and for supporters of the idea of a natural religion. Written at the end of the century, Antoine Van Dale's *Dissertationes de origine ac progressu idololatriae et supertitionum* was essentially translated into French in Bernard de Fontenelle's *L'origine des fables.* This last work was only published in 1724 (some twenty-five years after its redaction), the same annus mirabilis which saw the publication of Giambattista Vico's *Scienza nuova* and of François Joseph Lafitau's *Moeurs des sauvages amériquains comparées à celles des premiers temps.* This view on universally valid statements on religion was to have a deep influence on Hume, Comte, and nineteenth-century anthropologists.[22]

[22] Antoine Van Dale, *Dissertationes de origine ac progressu idololatriae et supertitionum* (Amsterdam, 1696); Bernard de Fontenelle, *L'origine des fables* (Paris, 1724); Giambattista Vico, *Scienza nuova* (Naples, 1724); François Joseph Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages amériquains comparées à celles des premiers temps* (Paris, 1724). On the importance of Fontenelle's work for the study of religion, see J. S. Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1987; reprint, Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), pp. 40–55.

In different ways, the works of John Selden, Gerard Vossius, and Herbert of Cherbury reflect the attempt to see in the various polytheistic religions alterations of primitive monotheism. The great jurist John Selden (1584–1654), one of the most learned and best minds of his generation, published in 1617 his *De Diis Syris syntagmata,* which was written as early as 1605. Although it is sometimes considered to have been written by the still immature Selden, this important book represents the first serious effort to deal with ancient polytheism from a nonclassical perspective.[23] Its dramatic influence on all later studies of ancient Near Eastern religion cannot be overestimated. The third chapter, for instance, is entitled "De tès polutheotès seu Deorum multitudinis origine et processu." Rather than looking for the roots of polytheism in Greece and Rome, Selden goes back to the biblical testimony on idolatry, which constitutes the core of his evidence, although by no means all of it. Selden refers not only to Hebrew but also to other Semitic languages. His references, which are derived from epigraphy as well as from classical, patristic, Rabbinic—including Kabbala—and Arabic literatures, show an impressively broad culture. Selden, however, keeps the reader confused as to his real goal and method. He certainly works as a comparativist (the first chapter, e.g., is entitled "De Gad, seu Fortuna"), but he is mainly interested in discovering genetic links, not simply parallels. For him, *ex oriente numen:* Since the evidence from the ancient Near East (Syria, Egypt, Persia, as well as the Hebrew Bible) antedates preclassical times, it is there that one has to search for the roots of European religion. Comparativism, then, is put here at the service of history, and Selden's method (the same he uses in his legal studies) can be described as historico-philological. For him polytheism is basically due to the multiplicity of symbols. With time, distinct images came to be perceived as different gods. This highly original theory about an early misunderstanding of symbol would soon influence Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe.*[24]

Selden is also the author of *De jure naturali et gentium,* a work which was to have a tremendous influence on the transformation of natural law

[23] John Selden, *De Diis Syris syntagmata* (London, 1617). Despite Selden's towering figure in both legal and intellectual history, almost no attention seems to have been devoted to his pioneering work as a historian of religion. Despite an English (partial) translation of *De Diis Syris,* under the title *The Fabulous Gods denounced in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1880), this work does not seem to have been analyzed. For Selden's interest in Jewish law, see *John Selden on Jewish Marriage Law: The Uxor Hebraica,* translated and with commentary by J. R. Ziskind (Leiden: Brill, 1991). Selden's *De iure naturali et gentium, iuxta disciplinam ebraeorum libri septem* (London, 1640) is a remarkable attempt to identify natural law and the seven Noachide commandments from the Jewish tradition. This, too, seems to have escaped scholarly attention. I. Herzog, "John Selden and Jewish Law," *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law,* 3d ser., 12 (1931): 236–45, does not grant this work any particular attention.

[24] Ralph Cudworth, *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678).

theory and its abandonment of scholastic patterns.[25] A major dimension of this work has remained unrecognized, despite its subtitle, *Iuxta disciplinam Ebraeorum.* This is indeed, essentially, a Rabbinic work on the seven Noachide commandments. It may be noted here that Selden was greatly influenced by his contemporary Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), whom he greatly admired, not only in his conception of natural law but also in his serious interest in Jewish law and religious history. *De Diis Syris* soon won its author a European reputation. Through Daniel Heinsius, a prominent Dutch humanist who had become closely associated with Selden when living in England, the book was reprinted in Leiden in 1627. Hence, it had a direct influence on later work on ancient polytheist cults, on the continent as well as in England.

Gerard Vossius's *De theologia gentili* is probably the most important work of comparative mythology in the seventeenth century, at least as approached from the classical perspective.[26] Vossius, or De Vos, was a Dutch scholar, and canon of Canterbury, whose loyalist sympathies are apparent from the dedication of the first edition of the *De theologia gentili* to Charles I. Selden's influence on his book is evident and is even reflected in the full title: *De theologia gentili et physiologia christiana, sive de origine ac progressu idololatriae,* which picks up the main theme of *De Diis Syris.*[27] Although much read and cited, Vossius's book is even less rigorously constructed than Selden's. It not only deals with the ancient Near East but also employs all the available pieces of information about polytheistic cults around the world, from the Brahmins of Calcutta and the Chinese to the native inhabitants of Peru and Mexico (as described by José de Acosta) and those of Virginia according to the English traveler Thomas Avioth.

Such works as Selden's *De Diis Syris* or Vossius's *De theologia gentili* were officially intended to expose idolatry wherever it hid by searching for its roots. Yet one receives the impression that they also reflect a hidden attraction to the richness of polytheist mythologies and cults. Moreover, they certainly encouraged an avowed sympathy for such ancient beliefs in the gods. The case of Edward Herbert, Lord of Cherbury (1583–1648), the father of English Deism, is an excellent case in point.[28] Herbert had read Vossius, whom he quotes concerning heathen practices

[25] John Selden, *De jure naturali et gentium: Iuxta disciplinam Ebraeorum* (London, 1640).

[26] Gerard Vossius, *De theologia gentili et physiologia christiana, sive de origine ac progressu idololatriae,* 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1641; reprint, New York: Garland, 1976). On Vossius, see C. Rademaker, *The Life and Works of G. I. Vossius* (Aachen, 1981).

[27] See Katchen (n. 8 above), p. 288. Selden's *De Diis Syris* (London, 1617) had been reprinted in Leiden in 1627.

[28] Edward Herbert's *De religione gentilium* was published posthumously in Amsterdam in 1663, but his *De veritate* had appeared in Paris in 1624, and a French translation was published in 1639. This work was never translated into English.

such as the worship of stars, for instance. Here too, evidence from both ancient and contemporary idolatry is used simultaneously, in order to search for what Herbert considers to be the five innate ideas, or axioms, of natural religion, to be found everywhere under different garbs. Hence, the various rituals of all religions were devised by priests, impostors seeking to hide the truth from simple people, who introduced everywhere superstition and idolatry. In this way, idolatry, which was originally derived from the Egyptians, came thence to the Syrians and the neighboring nations, and later to the Greeks and Romans, as it is for Herbert and for all his contemporaries a postulate that all religions came from the East. Beyond the obvious influences of contemporary literature on idolatry, such as the works of Selden and Vossius, one detects here a new meaning of religious imposture, a concept that until then had been applied mainly to Muhammad, considered by most Christian scholars to be the false prophet par excellence (see, e.g., not only the works of the biblical historian Humphrey Prideaux but also those of such an excellent orientalist as Adriaan Reland).[29] As is well known, the radical Deists would later develop the idea of the imposture of religious leaders throughout history with the help of the anonymous tract *De tribus impostoribus,* which would circulate throughout Europe in the eighteenth century, and according to which Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed had each in his turn succeeded in lying to their naive believers.[30] For Herbert, imposture was a universal feature of priestly religion, not a feature of Islam.

Herbert's views provoked a nearly universal hostility. It was clearly felt that a generalized attack on priesthood throughout the religions of mankind could not stop at the doorstep of Reformed Christianity. And indeed, Herbert's ideas soon became the backbone of Deism. In his *Diana of the Ephesians* (1680), Cherbury's professed disciple Charles Blount plagiarized *De religione gentilium,* and in *The Origins of Idolatry* (1695) developed the thesis that "before Religion, that is to say, Sacrifices, Rites, Ceremonies, pretended Revelations, and the like, were invented among the Heathen, there was no worship of God but in a rational way."[31] Similar ideas were to be repeated and developed in the following decades, in particular by John Toland (1670–1722).

Discourse on idolatry not only reflected the discovery of non-monotheistic religions, East and West, but was also directly linked to

[29] H. Prideaux, *The True Nature of Imposture* (London, 1697); A. Reland, *De religione Mohammedica* (Utrecht, 1705).

[30] See, e.g., S. Berti, "Unmasking the Truth: The Theme of Imposture in Early Modern European Culture, 1660–1730," in *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard H. Popkin,* ed. J. E. Force and D. S. Katz (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne, 1999), pp. 20–36. Berti has also edited the French text (with an Italian translation): *Trattato dei tre impostori: La vita e lo spirito del signor Benedetto de Spinoza* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994).

[31] Charles Blount, *Great is Diana of the Ephesians, or the Original of Idolatry, together with the Politick Institution of the Gentile Sacrifices* (London, 1695), p. 3.

Protestant apologetics against papism. To give only one instance of the anti-Catholic ethos of this discourse, one may refer, for instance, to the great Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614–88). In his *Antidote against Idolatry,* More defines idolatry as the proper fruit of animal life, a pathological immersion in sensuality and materiality, an immersion reflected not only in the worship of the sun and moon in the East Indies, but also in Catholic cult.[32]

It should be pointed out, however, that the search for the origins of religion in general, and of idolatry in particular, was not limited to Protestant intellectuals. Catholics, too, asked similar questions, although they usually began to do so a little later. Hence, Bernard de Montfaucon's monumental *Antiquitates Graecae et Romanae* starts with a (short) introduction "De Origine idololatriae," where he refers to Varro's work as summarized in Augustine's *De civitate Dei.* In the early eighteenth century, the Benedictine scholar Dom Augustin Calmet would feel the need to write a *Dissertation sur l'origine de l'idolâtrie,* where he argues that the idols worshiped by the Israelites in the desert must have been Egyptian deities.[33]

What clearly appears from the collection of the evidence is the central role of idolatry, ancient and modern, East and West, in seventeenth-century discourse on religion, its origins, and its historical development. Although apologetic considerations of one kind or another are never absent from this discourse, what strikes the reader is the boundless intellectual curiosity that it reflects, a will to search, with the light of knowledge rather than of theology, for the truth in religious matters and in the history of religion. These scholars believed that such a truth could be found through historical, comparative investigations. A clear example of this approach is reflected in Hugo Grotius's *Annotationes ad Vetus Testamentum,* which includes a section on idolatry.[34] Like other scholars, Grotius, who incidentally was Gerard Vossius's best friend, sees also in Israelite idolatry a phenomenon originating in Egyptian paganism—an approach that would later be developed by John Spencer.

Blount, as well as Herbert, Grotius, and, later, Calmet, perceived idolatry as directly resulting from both the cult of the stars and sacrifices.

[32] This trait of Protestant anti-Catholic polemics would, however, become weakened toward the end of the seventeenth century, as reflected, e.g., by the Huguenot theologian Pierre Jurieu: "Autrefois, quand on nous attaquait, nous attaquions à notre tour. Si l'on nous accusait de schisme et d'hérésie, nous accusions nos accusateurs d'idolâtrie et de superstition; mais ce règne est passé il y a longtemps" (preface to *Préjugés légitimes contre la papisme,* 2 vols. [Amsterdam, 1685], p. 1).

[33] Bernard de Montfaucon, *L'Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures,* 15 vols. (Paris, 1719–24). The *Dissertation su l'origine de l'idolâtrie* is inserted in the fifth volume of Augustin Calmet's *Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l'Ancienne et du Nouveau Testament* (Paris, 1726), 5:130–36.

[34] See H. Grotius, *Opera omnia theologica,* 3 vols. (London, 1689), *avodah zarah,* 1:39–43, on Exodus 20:4–5.

Can we identify a source from which came this trend of thought on the origins of idolatry? In that respect, surprisingly enough, the great intellectual figure of the seventeenth century is none other than the twelfth-century Jewish thinker Maimonides (1136–1204). Time and again, the various works I have mentioned here, as well as numerous others, refer to the writings of Maimonides, both to his magnum opus, *The Guide of the Perplexed,* and to his *Commentary on Mishnah Avodah Zarah,* that is, the Mishnaic treatise on idolatry. The influence of Maimonides on seventeenth-century European intellectuals has indeed been recognized, but it seems to me that his impact on the development of a new discourse on religion has not yet received the attention that it deserves.[35]

In 1630, Dionysius Vossius accompanied his father Gerard to Oxford and Cambridge. It was in England that he became an ardent student of religion. Bishop William Laud, the great orientalist Edward Pococke, first incumbent of the Regius Chair of Hebrew at Oxford, and Meric Casaubon, all had an influence on the young Vossius. In 1650, incidentally, Pococke published in his *Specimen historiae Arabum,* an Arabic text of Bar Hebraeus on pre-Islamic Arabic religion.[36] The greatest catalyst on Vossius junior, however, which brought him to translate into Latin Maimonides' tractate on idolatry, was probably Selden's *De Diis Syris,* a book that Vossius read three times, we are told. Vossius's annotated translation, ready in 1636, was published posthumously, by Vossius *père,* as *R. Mosis Maimonidae: De idololatria liber,* together with his own *De theologia gentili.*[37]

Dionysius Vossius's work on Maimonides' study of idolatry reveals the major reason for the strong attraction to Maimonides on the part of Christian intellectuals: more than any other ancient or medieval thinker, Greek, Christian, or even Muslim, Maimonides had offered a powerful reflection about the phenomenon of idolatry, reaching dramatic conclusions on its origin and nature. Maimonides' most original insights on idolatry, however, were to be found in his philosophical work, *The Guide of the Perplexed.* This book, written in Arabic, had been translated (from Al-Harizi's medieval Hebrew version) into Latin in the thirteenth century and was thus available to Christian theologians already in

[35] For Maimonides in England, see R. H. Popkin, "Some Further Comments on Newton and Maimonides," in *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology,* ed. J. E. Force and R. H. Popkin, Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Idées, 129 (Boston and London: Kluwer, 1990), pp. 1–7; S. Levy, "English Students of Maimonides," *Miscellanies of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 4 (1942): 61–77; J. L. Teicher, "Maimonides and England," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 16 (1951): 97–100.

[36] E. Pococke, *Specimen historiae Arabum* (Oxford, 1650). This was probably the first book printed at Oxford with Arabic types. See G. J. Toomer, *Eastern Wisedome and Learning: The Study of Arabic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 162–63.

[37] Mosis Maimonidae, *De idololatria liber, cum interpretatione latina et notis,* Dionysii Vossii (Amsterdam, 1941).

the times of Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, both great admirers of Maimonides.[38]

A new translation of the *Guide,* prepared, once more, from a Hebrew medieval version (this time, from Ibn Tibbon's, the Hebrew vulgate) rather than from the Arabic original, had appeared in Basel in 1629, under the title *Dux perplexorum.* Its author was Johann Buxtorf Junior (1599–1664). Buxtorf's translation is the version in which, from now on, the *Guide* would be read by people as different as Leibniz, Malebranche, Newton, or Bayle. Both the Hebrew version and the Arabic original, however, were available to orientalists. Joseph Scaliger, for instance, on receiving an Arabic copy of the work (in Hebrew characters, as is traditional) from Richard Thompson, wrote to his friend Isaac Casaubon, calling Maimonides' book as valuable as gold (*isometron chryson*).[39]

For us, Maimonides is a medieval Jewish thinker—by far the greatest among them—who systematized biblical and Jewish laws and reflected on their origins and reasons. As a philosopher, he stands within the great tradition of Aristotelian Arabic philosophy, together with al-Farabi and Averroes. As a Jewish thinker, he represents a major effort to harmonize Jewish religion with philosophy. Since the Middle Ages, however, Rabbi Mosis Aegyptus, also known under his Hebrew acrostic, Rambam, was considered by the Christians to be a great commentator of the biblical text, offering precious insights on its true or deeper meaning. In the seventeenth century, Maimonides was perceived by scholars investigating the nature and origin of religion as a great predecessor, a philologist of genius. For them, he was not an object of research but, rather, a highly gifted colleague, who had worked long ago on the same problems as themselves. Hence, Constantijn L'Empereur, for instance (1591–1648), who taught Hebrew in Leiden as "Professor Controversarium Judaicarum" and whose work on Jewish law shows striking similarities to that of Selden, did not consider Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* a legal code but, rather, a description of the history and the customs of the Jewish people. As Peter T. van Rooden writes, "He shared this opinion with almost all the Christian Hebraists of the seventeenth century. They all considered rabbinical literature as an exposition of the Old Testament."[40]

[38] See A. Wohlman, *Maïmonide et Thomas d'Aquin: Un dialogue exemplaire* (Paris: Cerf, 1988); and J. Schwarz, "Maimonides and Meister Eckhart" (Hebrew) (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996).

[39] J. Scaliger, *Epistolae omnes* (Frankfurt, 1628), epistola 62, pp. 177–80. Compare M. Kayserling, "Les hébraïsants chrétiens du XVIIe siècle," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 20 (1890): 261–68, referring to *Epistolae,* p. 465.

[40] P. T. van Rooden, *Theology, Biblical Scholarship, and Rabbinical Studies in the Seventeenth Century: Constantijn L'Empereur (1591–1648), Professor of Hebrew at Leiden* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1987).

In a series of chapters of his *Guide* (esp. 3.29–33), Maimonides develops his views on the origin of idolatry in the ancient Near East and of biblical injunctions on apparently nonrational precepts, such as sacrifices. In part, this theory is highly original, and Maimonides is quite conscious of having discovered sociological laws of religious behavior. In part, it is only a development of a well-known concept in patristic literature, usually called the theory of divine condescendence (Greek *synkatabasis,* Arabic *talaṭṭuf*).[41] As Shlomo Pines has shown, it is likely that Maimonides was influenced by the patristic theory, although the precise channels through which it reached him are still unclear.[42] Maimonides had argued in the *Guide* that the Israelites had been influenced during their stay in Egypt by its idolatrous rites and that it is in order to help them uproot these evil habits gradually that God ordered them to perform sacrifices. To the idea that both Israelite idolatrous practices and biblical sacrifices have an Egyptian origin (an idea that, as I have said, is basically the same as that of the Church Fathers), Maimonides adds his own original conception of idolatry. He states that he had the opportunity to read, in Arabic translation, various books written by the Sabians. Traditions about the Sabians from ancient Harran had already developed in Maimonides' own day into a highly complex set of stories that hopelessly mixed historical facts with legends and myths.[43] There is no possibility and no need to enter here into the nebulous traditions about the Sabians. Suffice to state that for him, "Sabians" was a generic name referring to all idolaters, ancient and modern alike, rather than the name of a concrete and distinct people. Their religion was based on the cult of the stars. Far from representing "primitive" ideas about idols, idolatry was thus a highly sophisticated approach to cultic activity. All this Maimonides could derive from what he considered to be Sabian literature, in particular from a book *On Nabatean Agriculture,* by the tenth-century author Ibn Waḥshiyya.[44] The title of this book, called in Arabic *Al-filâḥa al-nabaṭiyya,* had been translated into Hebrew as *Ha-ʿavoda ha-nabaṭit* (*avoda* meaning both culture and cult). The medieval

[41] See F. Dreyfus, "La condescendance divine (*synkatabasis*) comme principe herméneutique de l'Ancien Testament dans la tradition juive et dans la tradition chrétienne," *Vetus Testamentum* 36, suppl. (19): 96–107.

[42] On possible links between Maimonides and the patristic tradition, via Arabic Christian texts, see S. Pines, "Some Traits of Christian Theological Writing in Relation to Moslem Kalam and to Jewish Thought," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences* 5, no. 4 (1973): 4–6. Dreyfus finds Pines's suggestions unconvincing, but with rather weak arguments, and does not suggest any other channel of influence, thinking rather that the similarities stem from the same interpretative problems and methods.

[43] On the Sabians, see T. M. Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran,* Religions of the Greco-Roman World 114 (Leiden: Brill, 1992); see further S. Stroumsa, "Sabéens de Maïmonide et Sabéens de Harran," in *Maïmonide: Traditions philosophiques et scientifiques médiévales,* ed. T. Lévy (Paris: Presses du CNRS, in press).

[44] On Ibn Wahshiyya, see *Encyclopedia of Islam* 3:963–65 (by T. Fahd).

Latin translation of the *Guide,* however, had rendered it as *De agricultura Aegyptiorum* (rather than *Nabathaeorum*), and also *De servitio Aegyptio* (chap. 38),[45] while Buxtorf, feeling there was a problem here, had retained the Hebrew *ha-ʿavoda ha-nabaṭit.* This did not prevent readers of Buxtorf's translation, such as Leibniz, from referring to the supposedly Sabian book *De agricultura Aegyptiorum.* Samuel Purchas, too, refers to the book of the "Sabij" called *De agricultura Aegyptorum* yet extant in the hands of the Muhamedans and refers to it as the "Aegyptian service." Maintaining the erroneous translation about the book on Nabatean agriculture was not an innocent slip. It permitted the identification of the mythical Sabians with the Egyptians, and of their cult of the stars with Egyptian religion. Such a perception, incidentally, went together with a sublimizing view of Egyptian religion, a view that would become much more prevalent with eighteenth-century Egyptomania.

Maimonides' interpretation of the roots of idolatry is commonplace in the seventeenth century, and Stephen Nettles's response to Selden might serve here as one example among many: "Moses Ben Maimon in More Hanebucim writes that the end for which sacrifices were commanded, did tend especially to the rooting out of Idolatry; for whereas the Gentiles worshipped beasts, as the Chaldaeans and Aegyptians bullocks and sheep, with reference to the Celestiall Signes, Aries, and Taurus, etc. therefore (saith he) God commanded these to be slaine in sacrifice."[46]

As mentioned above, the influence of Maimonides on European thinkers did not begin in the seventeenth century. Since the patristic polemics of late antiquity, and until the dawn of the modern era, however, idolatry did not have the status of a major problem in Western thought. Hence, the Sabians could not have played the central role they were to play in the seventeenth century. This seems to me to be the reason for the puzzling fact that the seventeenth century saw the best days of Maimonides' theory, a fact whose significance is still underrecognized.[47] As Richard Popkin has pointed out, "there is as yet no study of the impact of Maimonides

[45] Reflecting the Hebrew translation *avodah mitsrit* (Egyptian agriculture) by the twelfth-century Abraham Ibn Ezra. The slip from "Nabathean" to "Egyptian" was explained longago by M. Steinschneider as stemming from the graphic similarity between *nabatiyya* (Nabatean) and *qubtiyya* (Egyptian) in Arabic script. Compare D. Chwolfsohn, "Über die Überreste der altbabylonischen Literatur in arabischen Übesetzung," *Mémoires des savants étrangers,* vol. 8 (Saint Petersburg, 1850), p. 12.

[46] Stephen Nettles, *Answer to the Jewish Part of Mr. Selden's History of Tithes* (Oxford, 1625), pp. 46–47.

[47] The Maimonidean moment in seventeenth-century thought, however, is stressed by Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), which I quote according to the French translation, *Théologie et imagination scientifique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), p. 274: it was in the seventeenth century, rather than in the Middle Ages, that Maimonides' theory had the most powerful influence. For further aspects of Maimonides' influence in the seventeenth century, see G. G. Stroumsa, "*Antiquitates Judaicae:* The Early Modern Study of Israelite Religion" (unpublished manuscript).

on seventeenth century European thought."[48] Jean Bodin had already referred to the Sabians and to Maimonides' conception of idolatry in his *Heptaplomeres Dialogue,* written in 1596.[49] In the second decade of the seventeenth century, Purchas spares no effort in his *Pilgrimage* to define idolatry and to identify its historical sources. The essence of paganism, he says, is the cult of the stars, as if they were divine, and this cult originated among the Sabians, the people among whom Abraham had grown up and against whose religious ideas he revolted. Purchas does not seem to have read Maimonides, but he refers to the correspondence between Scaliger and Casaubon, and it stands to reason to see Scaliger as the source of later references to the Maimonidean theory of idolatry. For Purchas, as for Maimonides, the Sabians are the representatives of the various ancient Near Eastern polytheistic religions. True religion is defined in opposition to paganism, and Israelite religion was born from the revolt against Sabian cult.

This is the background for the perception of the Sabians (often written *Zabii,* as in the Latin translation of the *Guide*) until John Spencer. This description of what the French call his *imaginaire* was needed if we are to understand him in historical context. Indeed, Spencer's book appears to be more often cited than read, and some quite unsatisfactory interpretations of his thought have been made recently. A monographic study of Spencer remains a desideratum.

When John Spencer (1630–93) first came to Corpus Christi College, in 1645, Cambridge already had a long Hebraist tradition, since the twenties of the preceding century, when Robert Wakefield, "the English counterpart to Germany's Reuchlin," had been appointed a lecturer in Hebrew at St. John's College.[50] In 1667, Spencer was unanimously elected Master of Corpus Christi, which he governed "with great prudence and reputation" for twenty-six years, after which he became a great benefactor of the College. He also was dean of Ely since 1677.[51] In 1669, Spencer published in Cambridge his *Dissertatio de Urim et Thumim,* a prelude to the larger work, the *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus et earum rationibus libri tres.* This work was published also in Cambridge in 1685 and in Amsterdam the following year.[52] *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus* includes the various studies penned by Spencer

[48] Popkin, "Some Further Comments on Newton and Maimonides" (n. 35 Above), p. 1.

[49] Jean Bodin, *Heptaplomeres Dialogue* (written 1596). Although this major text achieved a significant circulation in early modern Europe, it would not be published before the nineteenth century. See Jean Bodin, *Colloquium Reptaflomeres de rerum sublimium arcanis abditis,* ed. L. Noack (Schwerin, 1857).

[50] G. Lloyd Jones, *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England: A Third Language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 181, 214.

[51] See *Dictionary of National Biography,* 18:766–68, esp. 767.

[52] I am quoting from the third edition (Tübingen, 1732), a better edition. In this edition, the text is introduced by C. M. Pfaff's detailed Latin study of the international controversy aroused by Spencer's book.

for approximately twenty years. It is his magnum opus and represents a radical new departure in scholarship. In the words of a recent appraisal, "Spencer blazed a new trail and deserted the well-worn paths of earlier commentators and scholars. Later scholars merely follow in his wake."[53] Since the nineteenth century, Spencer's book has been recognized as a chef d'oeuvre, but the book has not received the careful analysis that such lavish praise would lead one to expect.[54]

Already at the time of its first publication, *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus* did not pass unnoticed. It signaled the beginning of a loud international controversy: Marsham, Le Clerc, and Jurieu, stood for him, while Witsius, Waechter, and later Calmet, opposed him. While Jacques Basnage, the great Huguenot historian of the Jews, was influenced by Spencer in his perception of Egyptian influences on Israel,[55] J. Edwards, as well as J. Bellman, opposed him, arguing that the ceremonial rites were intended to oppose idolatry. Giambattista Vico, too, who refers to Spencer's work at the beginning of his *Scienza nuova,* was certainly influenced by this theory of accommodation.[56]

It has been claimed that John Spencer was a Deist in disguise, who used the strategy of Herbert, Blount, and Toland in order to indict contemporary religion by presenting a history of heathenism. According to this thesis, the *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus* was meant as a challenge against the Mosaic dispensation, carefully disguised under the garb of its erudition and innovative scholarship.[57] To my mind, such an assessment shows a complete misunderstanding of Spencer.

Some fine studies of Spencer have recently been published, in particular by Francis Schmidt and Jan Assmann.[58] Yet no one seems to have identified the literary genre of *De legibus hebraeorum,* and this lack of identification precludes a clear understanding of Spencer's goal, methods, and achievements. Spencer was an excellent Hebraist, whose abilities and reading were not limited to the Hebrew Bible. Seventeenth-century

[53] S. D. Benin, "The 'Cunning of God' and Divine Accommodation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45 (1984): 179–91.

[54] H. Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1984), pp. 568–69, n. 31, refers to G. V. Lechler, *Geschichte des englischen Deismus* (Stuttgart, 1841), pp. 137–39, as the first in modern times to draw attention to Spencer's *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus.*

[55] F. Laplanche, *L'Ecriture, le sacré et l'histoire: Érudits et politiques protestants devant la Bible en France au dix-septième siècle* (Amsterdam and Maarssen: Holland University Press, 1986), p. 615.

[56] See Funkenstein, p. 276.

[57] J. Champion, *The Pillars of Priesthood Shaken: The Church of England and Its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 155; see pp. 155–57 for the (mainly hostile) reception of Spencer in England.

[58] F. Schmidt, "Des inepties tolérables: La raison des rites de John Spencer (1685) à W. Robertson Smith (1889)," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 85 (1994): 121–36; J. Assmann, "Before the Law," chap. 5 in, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 55–90.

Orientalists in Oxford and Cambridge mastered the various linguistic levels of Hebrew and were avid readers of medieval Hebrew literature. They occasionally wrote a poem or a letter in Hebrew. The index at the end of *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus* gives an impressive list of medieval Hebrew works referred to in the text, and we now know that many Rabbinic books, from Italian provenance, were available in England.[59] Hence, Spencer was quite aware that his book came in the wake of a long tradition in medieval Jewish theology, on the question of the reasons of the Divine Commandments (*taᶜamei ha-mizwoth*). Since Saadia Gaon (tenth century), medieval Jewish thinkers asked whether the commandments in the Torah, in particular the stranger or the more problematic among them, had any rational significance, besides the fact that they had been ordered by God.[60] Among the Jewish medieval thinkers, Maimonides found a solution radical in its rationalism: All commandments had a reason, all had a "useful purpose." In some cases, the reason was clear, in other cases, it was not, and the role of the exegete was to reveal it. It is in this context that Maimonides had referred to Ibn Waḥshiyya's *The Nabatean Agriculture* and to God's "gracious ruse" (a concept perhaps borrowed from the second-century C.E. philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias) to help free the Israelites from their idolatrous mental and religious habits. We have previously seen that there were two traditional theses in conflict on the roots of idolatry. That of plagiarism, since the days of the Church Fathers, had reached Vossius, Grotius, Bochart, Gale, and Huet. The condescendence thesis argued basically the opposite; rather than a degeneration, history reflected a progressive refinement of religious beliefs: a divine *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts,* to use Lessing's phrase.[61]

It is in this tradition that Spencer quite consciously and forcefully decides to inscribe himself: chapter 1 of the *Prolegomena* is entitled "Ostenditur leges et ritus Judaicos non sine ratione a Deo institutos."[62] He sees himself as Maimonides' direct successor, with two differences. The first is that he is a Christian, that is, a fully accomplished Jew, who understands the fuller meaning of God's law. As a Christian, Spencer is not bound to keep most ritual laws mentioned in the Torah, since Christ has offered a more spiritual way of being faithful to God's revelation. He thus understands, better than Maimonides, that there is an evolution in history, that God has revealed himself and his will gradually. Moses

[59] See I. Abrahams, "The Purchase of Hebrew Books by the English Parliament in 1647," *Jewish Historical Society of England, Transactions* 7 (1915–17): 62–77. I should like to thank my colleague Joseph Hacker for calling my attention to this article.

[60] On this literature, see J. Heinemann, *The Reasons of the Commandments in Jewish Literature* (Hebrew) 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1956); cf. A. Altmann, *Encyclopedia Judaica,* 5:783–92, s.v. "Commandments, Reasons for."

[61] Pinard de la Boullaye (n. 6 above), 1:180–81.

[62] John Spencer, *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus,* p. 1.

offered a religion truer than that of the Sabians. Jesus permitted a higher, more spiritual way of serving God than the ritual laws of Moses. And finally, the Reformation proposed a better Christianity than Catholicism, a religion with too many rituals, remnants, as it were, of earlier stages of religious life. In a sense, then, Spencer is quite aware of the fact that the *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus* is an apologetic work, fighting on various fronts: he is arguing against the Jews, who will be more easily converted once they understand the historical reasons of the commandments. At the same time, he fights the papists, but also the enthusiasts, Protestants who have left the high road of reasonable religion.

Jan Assmann has pointed out that Spencer carries Maimonides' views on historical evolution to their logical end, whereas Maimonides' evolutionary perspective on religious history remains locked by his belief that although the laws of the Torah were meant as a concession to earlier religious conceptions, they themselves could not be superseded. Assmann may not have been quite fair to Maimonides here, since the latter does not reject the idea of religious evolution but insists, rather, that it must be perceived within the frame of the laws of divine revelation. Although Maimonides' arguments are presented, first and foremost, as a historical analysis, his theoretical intentions are clearly and expressly those of a phenomenologist, rather than of a historian, of religion. Perhaps one could argue that Maimonides—before Ibn Khaldun—discovered laws of the sociology of religion rather than of the history of religions. One could say that, whereas Spencer sees paganism only as an early stage in the development of religious perceptions, Maimonides insists on the fact that pagan ideas are inherent in humankind and can occur in every generation.

Spencer's views are those of a Christian theologian. But he is also living in the second half of the seventeenth century, in Newton's Cambridge. His times are those of *ratio* par excellence. If his search for the *rationes* of the biblical rituals is so radical, it is also because he looks into the Great Book of God just as others are looking into the Great Book of Nature. The religious background against which one must understand Newton is now well recognized. He, and his colleagues, searched for traces of God's revelation in nature. I suggest here that the opposite metaphor is no less true: Spencer searched the Bible for traces of natural laws applicable to humans, that is, historical laws.

If Spencer's *ratio* is such a rich term, it is because it reflects the conflation of two meanings of the word. As I have argued, the first meaning is simply the translation of the Hebrew *taʿam,* reason *sive* significance. The second meaning is a translation of the Arabic *ʿaql,* reason *sive* intellect. Spencer is indeed a religious intellectual, like Maimonides, but living five centuries later. Being a man of his century, he does not only read the Bible (in the original text) and its commentaries. He

cannot separate his readings from the broader context of the momentous discoveries of his contemporaries. Spencer's interests are by no means only antiquarian. Present discoveries and new methods of inquiries bear directly on ancient history, but a better understanding of the latter also has direct implications on contemporary issues. Like others, he compares the Egyptian pyramids to those of the Aztecs and knows from his vast readings that if the contemporary Turks prohibit the consumption of pork, this has to be understood in the same religious context as the similar biblical prohibition. The reader of Spencer's book is left with a profound impression of awe or even magic. This impression is not only due to its monumental dimensions or to the versatile and boundless erudition showed by its author. It seems to me that the *De legibus hebraeorum ritualibus* is also so impressive because it reflects a complete mixture of the genres, based upon the recognition of the unity of mankind. If rituals everywhere are similar, after all, it is because of this essential unity of mankind. It is, in a sense, an ideal library, with open stacks and no walls, and infinite cross-references.

William Robertson Smith considered Spencer to have played a pioneering role in the comparative study of religion.[63] One may perhaps rather seen him as a pioneer historian of religion. "Comparative religion" is a somewhat static term, which does not fully carry the impact of Spencer's stand and contribution. It is as a historian that he writes, seeking to relativize and historicize religious phenomena, in order to better understand their origins. Hence, his great intellectual opponents are the *allegorizantium natio,* those who seek to understand the biblical text independently of any context. For Spencer, symbolism is a simulacrum of reason. He could not have had good intellectual relations with the Cambridge Platonists. Spencer can speak of the *rudes Israelitae,* and of the *vestigia* of idolatry in their religious habits, as so many *ineptiae tolerabiles* accepted by God, but only for a while, as a kind of "withdrawal therapy" (the term is Assmann's). The most obvious of these *ineptiae,* of course, are the sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple. Spencer offers an archaeology of religion, and his view of history is optimistic, since it is that of the progressive education of mankind by divine providence. Where the Deists saw a degeneration from the original pure and natural religion of earliest mankind, through the devilish imposture of the priests of all nations, Spencer read a long but constant progress from the early stages of history, thanks to a God who has no objection to aping the devil, in order to free men from the latter's clutches.

Spencer is not only a prolific writer. His footnotes also show him to have been an avid reader, in all the fields of knowledge open to him. Walton and Cappel for the biblical text, Kircher and Marsham for Egypt,

[63] See n. 7 above.

Pococke and Hottinger for oriental matters, and many others, from Scaliger, Buxtorf, and de Acosta to Purchas, L'Empereur, Reland, van Dale, Leone Modena, and Richard Simon. But the greatest figures in his pantheon, *ille respublicae literariae triumviri,* as he calls them, are Samuel Bochart, John Selden, and Hugo Grotius.

Did Spencer launch an intellectual revolution? In a sense, yes: he discovered, more clearly than others among his contemporaries, the laws of religious evolution. Like other revolutions, his is definitely overdetermined, in the sense that many conditions were needed in order to permit it. Not only his perfect knowledge of the Jewish intellectual and religious tradition was a necessary condition, but also the various discoveries of his contemporaries, from Marsham, who showed the chronological prominence of Egypt over Israel, to the Orientalists who were discovering patterns of Semitic religions.

Finally, another dimension of Spencer's discourse on religion should be mentioned. For him, as for Hobbes, Locke, and many other intellectuals (and as had been the case already for Maimonides), the political dimensions of the *respublica hebraeorum* are the object of constant discussions, in the relatively free political and intellectual English climate. Even in Catholic France, this would happen, although a bit later, and a direct line can be drawn from Claude Fleury's *Les moeurs des Israélites* to Montesquieu's and Rousseau's reflections on ideal society.[64]

Scholars and thinkers writing at the end of the seventeenth century, and in the first decades of the eighteenth, read Spencer seriously: from Bayle and Jurieu to Basnage, Calmet, and Vico.[65] It is the combination of philology and orientalism, of anthropological sensitivity and the will to communicate scholarly achievements to broader audiences, which would permit some of the most impressive intellectual achievements of the Enlightenment. But this is another story.

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[64] Claude Fleury, *Les moeurs des Israélites* (Paris, 1681).
[65] Laplanche, pp. 615, 677.